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ABSTRACT

Previous studies of unusually effective urban schools have focused on school characteristics considered influential in the schools' success, but few provide specific guidance for improving achievement in other schools. This study sought to describe organizational processes and arrangements within elementary schools implementing the Chicago Mastery Learning Reading Program in New York, New York, and Chicago, Illinois, and the Curriculum Alignment Project and other school-wide approaches for improving achievement in Title I schools in Los Angeles, California. The schools examined had six common major concerns: (1) aligning curriculum and instruction for classroom appropriateness; (2) arrangements for dealing effectively with low achievers; (3) emphasis on teaching higher-order cognitive skills; (4) assuring availability of appropriate instructional resources; (5) minimal record-keeping for teachers; and (6) improving homework quality and increasing parent involvement in student learning. Organizational processes/arrangements at the schools were commonly characterized by grade-level planning; outcome-based supervision; and comparative monitoring of student progress. Outstanding administrative leadership, especially as demonstrated in principal support for teachers, emerged as a significant determinant of school effectiveness. The instructional/organizational arrangements in the schools were considered to have potential for implementation in other urban school to improve school climates and student learning. (Author/MJL)

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Instructional and Organizational Arrangements for Improving Achievement at Inner City Elementary Schools

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During the past five years, much attention has been given to the topic of unusually "successful" or "effective" big city elementary schools, generally defined as schools at which academic achievement is higher than expected given the socioeconomic composition of the student body. In particular, many efforts have been made to identify the characteristics of unusually successful inner city elementary schools (i.e., schools with a relatively high proportion of poverty students). As a consequence, there is now a large literature on successful urban elementary schools, and much has been learned concerning the probable reasons for their success (Edmonds, 1979; Lezotte, et. al., 1980; Phi Delta Kappa, 1980).

Unfortunately, however, studies of unusually effective urban elementary schools have not quite reached the state of providing much specific guidance for improving achievement in other schools. It now seems fairly well established, for example, that outstanding leadership is required from a building principal or some other administrator and that instructional goals and activities must be focused on attainable objectives (see the PDK study cited above), but in general it is still unclear how organizational processes and arrangements to effectively focus instruction can be implemented on a widespread basis in big city schools.

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In this context, several promising efforts are now being carried out to improve academic achievement and create more successful inner city schools in big city school districts. One of the most encouraging efforts along these lines involves the development and implementation of materials to teach reading comprehension skills through the mastery learning approach in New York and Chicago. Another particularly important effort involves the development of school-wide approaches to improving achievement through systematic school-by-school planning in Title I schools in Los Angeles. These approaches raise a number of important questions involving the instructional and organizational arrangements and processes required for successful widespread implementation of improved instructional practices in big city schools.

With support from the National Institute of Education, we recently completed a study of arrangements and processes that have been followed in successfully implementing the Chicago Mastery Learning Reading Program (CMLRP) in Community District 19 in Brooklyn, New York, and in implementing other school-wide approaches at selected schools in Los Angeles and Chicago.[1] District 19 in New York provides the best current test of the CMLRP because it is only now being introduced widely in the Chicago Public Schools. School-wide approaches have been particularly important in Los Angeles because of that district's participation in the Schoolwide section of PL 95-561, which allows schools to avoid "pullout" arrangements by spending additional funds on students not educationally eligible for Title I.

Before summarizing the results of the study, we should emphasize that the inner city elementary schools we visited and described in the report are making impressive gains in improving students' reading achievement. Among the 21 elementary schools in District 19, for example, the percent of students

scoring two years or more below grade level on the California Reading Achievement Test decreased from twenty in 1979 to thirteen in 1981, and the percent of students at or above grade level increased from thirty to forty-one. At the Woodson South K-4 Elementary School in Chicago, fourth-grade reading achievement on the ITBS averaged 4.5 for 1980 and 1981, while the 107th Street School in Los Angeles registered a gain in percentage of reading skills mastered by sixth graders from 35 in 1979 to 56 in 1981.

We also should mention that: (1) two of the three Los Angeles schools included in the study were participating in the Curriculum Alignment Project initiated by the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and the Southwest Regional Laboratory for Educational Research and Development (SWRL) in 1979. The Curriculum Alignment Project is an in-service training activity which helps teachers select appropriate materials for teaching and testing essential skills to be emphasized in the LAUSD's "Balanced Curriculum" and its Survey of Essential Skills (Niedermeyer and Yelon, 1981); and (2) systematic, district-wide efforts had been made to implement the CMLRP effectively at schools in New York District 19. The most important of these efforts were the following:

-- a strong initiative and continuing visible support from Superintendent Frank Arricale, who made it clear that the comprehensive reading program and the CMLRP would be the key components in district efforts to improve student achievement and then reinforced this mandate through changes in the district office structure and personnel, individual meetings with principals regarding the comprehensive plan for their schools, and radical modifications in district expenditures.

-- continuing support from the United Federation of Teachers including participation of UFT officers in selection of the CMLRP, cooperation with the

union in teacher training and staff development, and a strong endorsement from UFT President Albert Shanker.

-- creation of a district-wide organizational structure specifically providing for five Staff Developers, a Resident Trainer in each school, and a full-time Reading Teacher whose function was explicitly articulated with the CMLRP in each Title I school.

Instructional Processes and Arrangements

All the schools we visited and described in the study had six major instructional characteristics in common: curriculum and instruction were being explicitly and painstakingly aligned to improve the appropriateness of instruction in the classroom, with particular attention being paid to issues involving effective pacing of instruction; more effective arrangements had been introdced for dealing with the learning problems of low achieving students than usually are found in connection with Title I or other special compensatory education arrangements at inner city elementary schools; and emphasis was placed on teaching higher-order cognitive skills; "assured availability" of teaching resource materials; minimal record-keeping for teachers; and improving the quality of homework and parent involvement in students' learning.

With respect to curriculum alignment, Los Angeles elementary schools either were participating fully in the Curriculum Alignment Project or were aligning objectives, instruction, and testing less formally through intensive staff development and supervision, and Chicago and New York District 19 schools either were achieving a degree of alignment through introduction of and emphasis on the CMLRP and related staff development or through years of staff development focusing on selection and correlation of learning objectives, teaching, and assessment of student performance.

With respect to special arrangements for low achieving students, all of the schools were effectively targeting resources to help their most educationally retarded students through a school-wide effort that eliminated or minimized the dysfunctional aspects of pullout instruction. In the case of District 19 schools, this was done largely by systematically coordinating federal, state, and local resources for compensatory education and devising parallel instruction and related arrangements (e.g., use of the CMLRP in both regular and parallel classes, introduction of a school-wide writing program) for the lowest achieving students. This approach also has the virture of reducing the class size, usually by one-half, of regular classroom teachers who are assigned the lowest achieving reading group within a particular grade. In the case of the Chicago and Los Angeles schools, arrangements for eliminating or minimizing negative pullout effects varied with the school, but each had worked out arrangements other than the modal Title I pattern in which the lowest achieving students are temporarily removed from the regular classroom for instruction that frequently is not well coordinated with that in the regular class.

With respect to greater emphasis on teaching higher-order cognitive skills, the Chicago mastery learning reading materials with learning strategies are specifically designed to make this happen, and the Curriculum Alignment Project helps teachers identify and overcome the problems associated with basal readers and other textbooks that teach reading comprehension, math problem-solving, and other relatively abstract skills poorly or not at all. Perhaps the best example of emphasis placed on higher-order skills among the schools in this study was at Woodson South in Chicago, where students are required to score eighty percent in mastery of comprehension skills even though

many inner city schools in Chicago with much lower achievement do not set a specific reading comprehension standard for promotion to the next grade.

By "assured availability" of teaching resources, we mean that schools in our study had instituted specific measures to make sure that appropriate instructional resources are easily available to teachers. Actions to assure resource availability took a variety of forms such as assigning resource personnel and/or aides the task of providing teachers with enrichment or corrective materials appropriate for a given classroom, duplicating testing materials and delivering them in sufficient quantity to the classroom, and making arrangements for parents or college students to assist in materials preparation and delivery to individual teachers. Schools participating in the CMLRP had resource personnel who delivered mastery-learning teaching and testing materials to the classroom teacher, and 107th Street School had computerized correlation charts produced in the Curriculum Alignment Project in order to provide teachers with an immediate listing of resources for teaching specific skills to specific children. Many of the schools also had established or reorganized teachers' resource centers so that all the materials available in the school were keyed (i.e., color coded or otherwise designated) to specific essential skills. Unusual emphasis also was placed on assigning trained aides to tasks that helped make appropriate instructional materials immediately available to the teacher. One major result of these efforts was that faculty no longer could legitimately say that obtaining appropriate materials was too burdensome a responsibility for a busy classroom teacher.

With respect to minimal record-keeping for teachers, all the schools in this study in one way or another had acted to minimize the teacher's burden in collecting and maintaining data required for a mastery-oriented learning

approach. The CMLRP was, in part, explicitly designed to reduce the burdensome record-keeping tasks inherent in Chicago's continuous-progress mastery curriculum, and beyond that administrators at District 19 schools took great pains to minimize teachers' record-keeping responsibilities in connection with the CMLRP. Among schools that had established other school-wide approaches and arrangements, this goal also was particularly salient at Woodson South, where Principal David Helberg devised simple arrangements for keeping good records, and at 107th Street School, where the computer was put to good advantage after curriculum had been aligned and "assured availability" support services had been carefully arranged.

With respect to improving the quality of homework and parent involvement in student learning, to a significant degree this was being accomplished either by implementation of the CMLRP, which specifies reading skills to be learned in a manner that can help parents understand how they can facilitate homework and other learning reinforcement activities, and/or by introduction of an aligned curriculum which can help parents identify essential skills and understand how their children are progressing in skill mastery.

More than merely introducing the CMLRP and/or an aligned curriculum, however, nearly all the schools were actively encouraging and assisting parents to find ways to help their children master essential skills, particularly with respect to homework. At the Powell School in Chicago, for example, parents received information that related local library resources to essential skills and homework assignments. May School (in Chicago) parents are encouraged to provide the administration with feedback about unproductive homework assignments, 107th Street School parents receive regular computerized mailings describing their children's performance on essential skills, Fourth Street (in

Los Angeles) parents participate in Saturday workshops on topics involving facilitation of learning, Woodson South parents are notified as soon as a child begins to make unsatisfactory progress, and all District 19 parents receive booklets describing and explaining various aspects of that district's comprehensive reading program. There are many ways, one can conclude, through which successful inner city schools involve parents in helping to improve their children's mastery of essential skills.

Organizational Processes and Arrangements

The schools described above exemplified three major characteristics involving organizational processes and arrangements: instructional planning emphasized grade-level decision-making; supervision had become much more outcome-based; and comparative monitoring of student progress was emphasized as part of the decision-making progress in several schools.

With respect to grade-level planning of instruction, it should first be noted that our study reinforces much recent analysis and research pointing to building-centered staff development as the key level for effective in-service training. Neale, Bailey, and Ross (1981), for example, recently surveyed the literature on school improvement strategies and concluded that in-service training should be "located in the local school building, directed by the principal and staff of that building to meet educational needs identified by the staff and clientele of that school." All the schools described in this study placed intensive and on-going emphasis on building-level staff development to the extent that this was virtually a defining characteristic of their mode of functioning. District 19 schools had a full-time Resident Trainer, two of the Los Angeles schools were participating in the Curricilum Alignment

Project which provides school-wide staff development, and all the schools conducted a wide range of staff development activities initiated by the principal or other resource personnel or the teachers themselves.

Even more specific than the emphasis on building-level staff development, furthermore, was the centrality of grade-level and adjacent-grade-level instructional planning at most of the schools described in the study. Instructional decision-making carried out by a group of teachers at a given grade is probably the most important organizational arrangement in the Curriculum Alignment Project, and grade-level instructional planning also was a key consideration at Woodson South in Chicago, where teachers meet weekly to help make all types of instructional decisions including the assignment of students to classes and the selection of textbooks for each grade. At schools where grade-level meetings were relatively less frequent, such as P.S. 214 in New York and Huntington Drive in Los Angeles, resource personnel such as Title I coordinators serve as an almost omnipresent link between teachers within and across adjacent grade levels.

We also want to emphasize that grade-level planning requires and encourages participation that is both active and continuing. Much has been written concerning the pros and cons of "top-down" vs. "bottoms up" planning, but discussion on this topic frequently misses the point that quality and quantity in "grass-roots" participation probably are more important than whether initiative starts at the top or bottom and then proceeds up or down.

With respect to outcome-based supervision, introduction of the CMLRP in some of the schools in our study and of an aligned curriculum with detailed grade-level and individual teacher planning for the teaching of specified essential skills had focused supervision much more clearly on concrete questions and

data than generally is true in most elementary schools, whether inner city or not. Because the CMLRP is structured to provide information on student mastery for teachers, supervisors, and other resource personnel, supervisory conferences centered more than usually was true before on concrete issues involving the improvement of instruction. Because curriculum alignment carried out in the context of a district-wide list of essential skills for each grade and criterion-referenced tests for assessing mastery of these skills provide data more useful than most schools now have for diagnosing and prescribing solutions to students' learning problems, supervisory conferences could center on questions involving the effectiveness of instruction rather than on broad discussion of deficiencies in students, materials, or teachers. "What materials can we find to improve the teaching of topic sentences among students who did not master this skill in Mastery Level K?", "How can we accelerate the pacing of comprehension instruction for five students in Mastery Level C?", and "How can we obtain more tests to assess student performance after corrective instruction on making inferences?" were the kinds of questions teachers and supervisors were addressing together at the schools in this study. By way of contrast, supervisory conferences at schools we have visited in the past more typically dealt with broader questions such as "Where can we find better materials to teach reading?", "Where can we find materials students will be more interested in?",and "Why can't these children learn?"

It should be noted that "data-based" supervision of the kind we found in the schools in this study has been gaining increasing support nationally under the theme of "clinical" supervision. In fact, most of the schools we visited could serve as models for a cyclical clinical supervision process in which a teacher discusses instructional goals with the supervisor at a pre-observation

conference, the supervisor then collects data on goal attainment through actual classroom observation, and the data are discussed at a post-observation conference at which the teacher and supervisor share ideas for improvement of instruction.

With respect to comparative monitoring of student progress, we found that many of the schools in the study were charting student performance and progress on a class-by-class basis and using this information to set minimum goals for introduction and pacing of lessons and materials. Collection and analysis of these data seemed to be particularly important with regard to low achieving students, because this type of monitoring helped teachers of relatively low achieving reading groups see that some were progressing more rapidly than others and led to re-examination of instructional procedures and techniques for low achieving students. Comparative monitoring of student progress was particularly evident at Woodson South in Chicago, where charts showing the performance of groups of students within classes were used as a basis for discussion at grade-level and faculty meetings and at teacher-supervisor conferences.

Of course, comparative monitoring of student progress can be threatening to teachers and can be misused in a simple-minded way to reach facile conclusions about the ability or performance of teachers. Administrators at Woodson South and several other schools in this study were well aware of this danger and were trying to use comparative monitoring of student progress as a basis for instructional program review and revision rather than a club to pounce upon "bad" teachers. On the other hand, these administrators also were aware that comparative monitoring can serve to highlight and thereby reward the success of teachers whose students are making good progress.

Leadership Characteristics and Emphases

Outstanding leadership, usually on the part of a building principal, has long been recognized as an indispensable prerequisite in accounting for the success of an unusually effective school. Examples of outstanding administrative leadership at both the building and the district or sub-district level were illustrated throughout the study. We will not try to review all these illustrations here, but instead will call attention to two particularly important characteristics that were apparent at all the schools.

First, administrators were both supportive of teachers and skilled in providing a structured institutional pattern in which teachers could function effectively. Examples of supportive leadership included attention paid to school security considerations in District 19 and at other schools, careful (but informal) accounting such that extra time volunteered by teachers was "paid back" to the extent possible at P.S. 174 (in New York) and other schools, and provision of opportunities for teachers to have additional "breathing time" as necessary at many of the schools. Supportive administration, however, was embodied not so much in any single policy or action on the part of administration, but even more by a pervasive concern for the problems teachers face every day in the school and an orientation to perceive problems and respond with understanding of the teacher's point of view.

Of course, it was no surprise to find that building principals and other administrators working with the schools in our study provided leadership that was both structured and supportive. Decades of research and analysis on organizational effectiveness have indicated that both these dimensions of leadership are important in determining the success of an organization, whether

one uses these terms specifically or instead substitutes others such as "consideration" and "structure" or "person-oriented" and "institution-oriented" (Hersey and Blanchard, 1977).

Second, administrators of the schools in this study were willing and able to interpret rules in a manner that enhanced rather than reduced the effectiveness of their institutions. In many cases this meant that rules and regulations were "bent" to the point that they were mangled or broken, or at least might have been perceived as such by administrators or officials at a higher organization level. For obvious reasons we will not give specific examples of adaptation or modification of rules that were somewhat freely interpreted with a view to improving the effectiveness of schools in the study, but we do want to emphasize that higher-level administrators generally seemed tolerant or even supportive of rule adaptations that might well have been questioned in a rigid bureaucratic hierarchy. One principal whom we interviewed referred to such adaptations as "creative administration," and another said that "There is no way the central office can prevent me from interpreting rules so they are effective in this school. Our parents wouldn't stand for it because their children are learning." In general these and other statements were reminiscent of those obtained from principals more than ten years ago in a previous study of effective inner city schools in Chicago (Doll, 1969).

Additional Conclusions

Having delineated organizational and instructional processes and arrangements that appear to be associated with improved reading achievement at inner city schools, we will conclude with several brief comments regarding approaches to improving schools in general and inner city schools in particular.

First, the instructional and organizational approaches and arrangements we described in this paper may point the way toward more widespread and rapid improvement of inner city schools than many concerned observers heretofore have thought possible. It is true that full-scale Organization Development approaches in which faculty re-examine their educational philosophy and develop a high level of skill in "problem solving, communication, collaboration, participation, trust, and uncovering and confronting conflict" (Fullan, Miles, and Taylor, 1981) prior to reforming instruction may not work in big city school districts which lack time and money to implement this approach and which function in a turbulent environment. The difficulties inherent in trying to fundamentally reform big city schools--or any sizable group of schools, for that matter--have led many to despair concerning the prospects for widespread improvement in the inner city. Stephen Miller (1981) recently posed the underlying issue involved as follows:

> . . .'Does there exist a large number of low income schools . . . which we must write off as to the possibility of improving school learning climate and raising achievement?' That prospect is dismal; there are far too many schools in low SES communities where achievement is low and the learning climate is far too typical. Unfortunately, many researchers on educational change suggest that change agents only attempt innovations in schools which are 'ready' for change. . . . Perhaps we will have to qualify our ending with the statement, At this time there may be some schools which are not ready for or are unwilling to change. But . . . even public schools respond to inevitable outside pressures for change. Maybe an aroused public demanding high achieving, high quality schools for <u>all</u> children is the answer (p. 17).

Miller, Wilbur Brookover, Ronald Edmonds, and others are developing approaches for improving school learning climates and other factors that may raise the achievement of students at inner city schools. At the present time, however, it is not known whether or to what extent the positive learning climate found at successful inner city schools causes or reflects high achievement or can be

introduced effectively at other schools less "ready" for change.

Keeping this uncertainty in mind, we believe that some of the instructional and organizational arrangements described in this paper can be introduced and implemented effectively in a large number of schools, and that doing so can help generate a more positive school climate and improved student learning. This is particularly the case with respect both to the CMLRP, which can be viewed as a content technology to improve teaching and learning, and to Curriculum Alignment in-service training, which can be viewed as a process technology to improve curriculum and instruction. Of course neither of these approaches nor any other will work unless they are implemented well, but they do provide a means to improve the performance of teachers and students and, hence, to improve school climate and reverse the typical syndrome of failure and frustration found in so many inner city schools. From this point of view, the CMLRP, the Curriculum Alignment Project, and the Schoolwide Project under ESEA Title I represent a means to bring about incremental school improvement at a large number of inner city schools.[2]

Finally, we want to stress that the instructional and organizational arrangements and processes described in our report must be meshed with each other and adapted to the individual school building if they are to improve achievement at inner city schools. It would be easy enough, for example, to pass out CMLRP materials to teachers throughout a school or school district, or to mandate grade-level curriculum-alignment training and planning for all teachers, but actions of this sort probably would have little long-range impact unless accompanied by appropriate support services and outcome-based supervision, school-wide arrangements targeting some resources effectively on the problems of low achieving students, and "creative" (i.e., risk-taking) administration on the

part of building principals. When these and other interrelated arrangements and processes are well coordinated, on theother hand, inner city schools will be both more consistent and more consistently effective than they have been in the past.

Footnotes

[1]Daniel U. Levine and Joyce Stark, Instructional and Organizational Arrangements and Processes for Improving Academic Achievement at Inner City Elementary Schools. NIE-G-81-0070. Kansas City, Mo.: Center for the Study of Metropolitan Problems in Education, University of Missouri-Kansas City, Kansas City, Missouri 64110. Copies of the full report are available for $3.00. Copies of a 63-page, extended summary version are available for $2.00.

[2]We are contrasting incremental school improvement with the kind of fundamental school reform we described at Woodson South and Powell Schools in Chicago. Both these schools had worked out unusually effective instructional programs over a period of five-to-ten years.

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